

Conducting Oral History with Iraq War Veterans and their Families: A Brief Guide

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Prepared by the Oral History Working Group
of Historians Against the War (HAW)

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Introduction

In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq on the premise that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. In fall 2004, the U.S.'s own "Iraqi Survey Group" confirmed what many skeptics maintained: Iraq did not produce these banned weapons. A debate over the legality of the war has raged in the United States and across the globe. Too often these debates obscure the reality of war and how it impacts the soldiers and their families. Consequently, Historians against the War has launched an Oral History project to preserve the memories of both soldiers and their family members.

In an effort to capture testimonies from the widest possible sample, we invite scholars from across the country to participate in this project. The purpose of this project is to collect these memories while they are still fresh and vivid, thereby providing an invaluable resource for future historians and researchers. However, many people can and should be involved in the process as the value of oral history extends well beyond creating an archive of testimonies. A related purpose of this research is to help veterans understand and clarify their experiences, and to help non-veterans understand aspects of the war largely missing from the media. **Interviewees are invited to participate whether their experience with the war in Iraq is positive, negative, or somewhere in-between.**

This brief guide is designed to assist interested parties in gathering oral histories of Iraq War veterans and their families. It contains information on audio equipment, interview techniques, sample questions and some of the legal issues involved. Interested parties should consult their local Institutional Review Board (IRB), particularly those employed by a college/university or other educational institution. Before beginning any project check with your local human subject research board and the Oral History Association web page guidelines at http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub_eg.html.

The Historians against the War plans to post the testimonies on its webpage (<http://www.historiansagainstawar.org>). Future plans include publishing select testimonials in book form. We, of course, would properly credit all interviewers and interviewees. If you know a veteran that wishes to be interviewed, ask him/her to contact the address below. Or, if you are interested in joining this national project by conducting interviews in your location, please send audio taped interviews and/or transcripts to:

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P.O. Box 58
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For more information, send an e-mail to mirracc@yahoo.com

Please read this guide carefully and consult the recommended readings and remember to complete the Oral History Agreement with your subject before conducting interviews.

ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT/CONSENT FORM

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The undersigned are an Interviewer who wishes to do oral history of the war in Iraq, and an Interviewee who is willing to describe his or her experience.

Interviewer and Interviewee understand:

1. This Agreement is entirely voluntary. Either party can withdraw from the Agreement at any time by simply notifying the other party in writing. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty.
2. Interviewer is associated with Historians Against the War (HAW). The desire of HAW and of Interviewer is to assist veterans, active duty personnel, persons considering military service, and relatives and friends of the foregoing, to record their experiences while the memories are still fresh and vivid. HAW and Interviewer seek the truth. Interviewees are invited to participate whether their experience with the war in Iraq is positive, negative, or somewhere in-between.
3. The Interview will be recorded on audio tape or video tape at Interviewer's expense. After the interview, Interviewer will within a reasonable period of time provide Interviewee with a transcript of the interview, together with any footnotes Interviewer intends to be part of the finished interview; and Interviewee will within a reasonable period of time provide Interviewer, in writing, any corrections desired.
4. *The transcribed and corrected interview may be used by the Interviewer for publication on the Historians against the War webpage; in pamphlet and/or book form. The Interviewee may use the transcribed and corrected interview for any desired purpose.*
5. Interviewer agrees to ensure that the transcribed and corrected interview becomes part of a collection of all transcribed interviews maintained by HAW.
6. Interviewer has obtained the proper permission to conduct and reproduce oral histories.
7. Interviewee must circle desired response: I WANT / DO NOT WANT my name used with this testimony.
8. Interviewer shall obtain written permission from Interviewee to quote portions of the transcribed interview to insure that no statements are quoted out of context.
9. To make sure we represent you accurately, we will be recording this interview. You have the right to refuse to be recorded.
10. *If at any point you wish to pause, not respond to a specific question, stop your interview or withdraw from the study, you are free to do so. Any particular Interviewer and particular Interviewee may, if they wish, make such written additions to this Agreement as expresses their common desires.*

I understand the nature of the study and voluntarily agree to participate in it. I understand that I can terminate the interview and/or withdraw at any time. I have read the above and received a copy of this consent form. I agree to have the interview tape recorded.

s/Interviewer: _____

Interviewer – Printed name: _____

s/Interviewee: _____

Interviewee – Printed name: _____

Interview Questions / Topics

for the Historians against the War / Oral History with Iraq War Veterans and Their Families

These questions are offered as a sample. As an interviewer, you should let your own curiosity guide your questions rather than simply following a predetermined script.

Date of Interview _____

Interview conducted by _____

Introduction: This project is sponsored by Historians against the War. We are trying to better understand the experiences of Iraq War veterans and their families. Interviewees are invited to participate whether their experience with the war in Iraq is positive, negative, or somewhere in-between. The central purpose of this project is to gather and preserve the narratives of veterans and their families. If at any point you wish to pause, not respond to a specific question, stop your interview or withdraw from the study, you are free to do so.

I would like to start with some basic information questions:

Name: _____

1. Tell me about your background. Where do you live?
2. What branch of the service are you (or did you serve) in?

Now I would like to ask you about your experience in the military.

3. Why did you join the military?
4. Explain your basic training.
5. Describe your first duty station.
6. Have you served in combat?
7. If yes to 6, explain what it was like.
8. What is your most vivid memory of your combat experience?

9. Describe Iraq (or Afghanistan).
10. Tell me a little bit about your experiences with the Iraqi/Afghan people.
11. I'd like to know about any of the changes that you've seen in Iraq (or Afghanistan) since you had been there.
12. How have these changes affected you personally?
13. Tell me a about your experiences with the US military command or your commanding officers.
14. What do you think are the major issues facing the occupation of Iraq (or in Afghanistan)?
15. Do you think that the US should remain in Iraq or withdraw?
16. How do you feel about the administration's claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction?
17. Is there anything else that you would like to say that I have not asked?

Thank you for your time.

Suggestions for Interviewing Subjects:*

1. Before the interview ask the interviewee to complete a brief biographical data form. It should contain branch of service, rank, combat experience, years of service, and the date of enlistment.
2. Before the interview verify (or arrange for verification of) military service. Military personnel should have either an ID Card or a DD214, Record of Separation form.
3. Test all audio equipment before the interview. Select a quiet and comfortable setting.
4. Begin the recording with an introduction: state the names of interviewer and interviewee, location, date, title of project, and a brief description of the goals and significance of the project.
5. Maintain eye contact and nod head to indicate interest throughout.
6. Avoid Yes/No questions.
7. Avoid convoluted questions. Ask focused, clear questions, one at a time.
8. Avoid “leading” questions. Do not insert your opinion into the interview.
9. The following questions are helpful for clarification: What did it look like? How did that feel? Do you remember the smell?
 - And also simple questions that get to a larger social context: What did your family think of that? What did your buddies say? What did the officers do?
 - And always remember that you can get a lot of further detail by being honest about your own confusion: I’m not sure I understand. Can you explain that again? What do you mean by that? What’s that expression mean?
10. Do NOT challenge narratives that you feel are inaccurate. You may mention what other testimonials say on the topic and ask the interviewee to clarify.
11. An interview usually runs between 60 and 90 minutes.
12. Be sure to sign the release form and thank the interviewee.

* Interview suggestions are drawn from the Library of Congress and Baylor University Institute for Oral History.

Transcript from a Sample Interview

Michael Harmon served as a combat medic in the U.S. Army 4th Infantry Division and was deployed to Iraq in April 2003. He lives in Brooklyn, NY and is a college student studying respiratory therapy.

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. I was not sure what I was going to do after high school and I took a year off. I met with an Army recruiter, who only told me the great things about the military and I joined. As a New Yorker, I was also affected by 9/11 and felt that joining the Army made sense. I was shipped to Fort Benning, Georgia in May 2002 for basic training, then to Texas for medical training.

On Martin Luther King Day in 2003, we told that we were going to war against Iraq. I did not see any tie between Iraq and 9/11. But, I was a fresh, young inexperienced soldier and I did what I was told. My division originally planned to invade through Turkey, but they refused to allow the US entry for the invasion.

After arriving in Iraq, I remember my first taste of combat. I was driving in a HUMVEE smoking a cigarette and all of a sudden I heard machine gun fire, small arms fire and RPG's [rocket propelled grenades] exploding around us. We returned fire. Another day we were doing vehicle checks and my Sergeant and I were enjoying an MRE [meal ready to eat]. We didn't get to eat all that much. We were limited to one MRE and two bottles of water a day. The scout HUMVEE was fired on and it had a Javelin [portable anti-tank weapon] inside, so it exploded. I remember one guy who was literally split open. It was crazy. It was surreal. After such scenes, I would smoke five cigarettes in a row. It felt like I was watching a movie; it was pretty scary and sick. I saw shot children and dead children as well as dead soldiers.

While I was there stuck doing this, I thought I might as well try to help whoever I can. I offered medical services to my fellow soldiers and they appreciated it. This kept me going.

My first sergeant was really scared, he wouldn't leave the base. He used the generator for himself while the soldiers had no lights. My captain, however, was decent and treated us fairly.

I talked with the Iraq people. They wanted to know what we were doing there. One Iraqi said, "Fuck America." But, we were in his country; he had a right to say it. The people really didn't want us there. They were glad Saddam was gone, but they didn't want us there. Poverty in Iraq was unbelievable.

I don't trust my government anymore. The whole war was a lie -- based on the false WMD claim. I just read a news story about Tony Blair and George Bush having a meeting where Bush made it clear that he was going to war no matter what. Bush proposed painting a spy plane in United Nations colors to create an incident where Saddam might fire on it. More and more evidence is coming out against Bush. The whole Bush regime can't be trusted. And a poll showed that over 70 percent of U.S. soldiers want the U.S. to leave Iraq.

The U.S. should withdraw from Iraq immediately. Iraqi polls show that the violence will be less if we leave. The division between the Shiites and Sunnis is largely because of the invasion. Remember Bush divided the U.S., saying “you are either with us, or with the terrorists.” He drew a massive rift in this country and he drew a massive rift in Iraq. When I was there early on, I didn’t see this Sunni/Shiite tension. Before the invasion, they were a sovereign country and Bush can’t explain that. Another thing Bush says is that he wants democracy. But when it doesn’t go his way, he has a fit. For example, Hamas was elected by their people, then Bush said oh no this is not allowed. He is a terrible leader, who is out for “white” America. By this I mean rich, corporate America: Halliburton and the oil companies. He is not looking out for the average person.

Soldiers who return from war are starting to question it. It takes a while to process what happened. When soldiers first return, they are very angry. People should notice this and ask why are these people coming back messed up? Why support something that is destroying soldiers and families in Iraq? I ask people directly: ‘How would you feel if your child was just blown up?’ You can say “support the troops” all you want, and put yellow ribbons on your gas guzzling SUV to feel better about yourself. I say let’s wake up. The Bush regime is wrong. People have accused me of being a traitor for saying these things. I am not a traitor. I was a soldier who served in Iraq and I say immediate withdrawal is the way to support the troops.

When I returned home, I did not know what was wrong with me. Your body is so pumped up after being on high alert for so long; you no longer know how to relax. I didn’t shower or shave. I was diagnosed with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and took pills, which did not help. There was talk of redeployment after I just returned. I had about a year and a half left on my contract and it was made clear to me that I was going to get stop-loss [service extended beyond discharge date]. I told the military to let me out. There was a fight, they gave me a field grade Article 15[non-judicial punishment] and stripped my rank. I told them I will not do it any more. They let me go. I guess they didn’t want a problem soldier infecting the ranks.

Recommended Readings

Christian Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking Adult, 2003)

John Neuenschwander, "Oral History and the Law," Oral History Association Pamphlet, Oral History Association, Dickinson College, P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013 (\$15, check/money order)

Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

Linda P. Wood, "Oral History Projects in Your Classroom," Oral History Association Pamphlet, Oral History Association, Dickinson College, P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013. (3-hole punched notebook format. 87 pages. Bibliography. \$15, with binder \$20)

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Historians Against the War (HAW)

<http://www.historiansagainstwar.org>